

Lewiston Tribune, Thursday, Dec. 3, 2009 – by Elaine Williams

Regence trimming Lewiston work force

Regence BlueShield of Idaho has eliminated 89 positions at its Lewiston office since January due to the sagging economy, but only 19 of the reductions involved cutting filled jobs. The restructuring has left Regence with 645 employees in Lewiston, said company spokesman Mike Tatko.

That size of staff is more suited to meet the needs of its customer base, which has shrunk as companies have downsized or eliminated medical insurance to save money, Tatko said. "We owe it to our members to serve them as efficiently and effectively as possible," he said. "Unfortunately, reductions sometimes have to occur."

Cutting employees was a last resort after Regence implemented other cost-saving measures such as replacing travel with teleconferencing, Tatko said. Each time an employee left or retired, Regence evaluated if the position needed to be filled or if someone else could absorb the duties.

That process happened not only in Idaho, but also in the three other states Regence serves - Washington, Oregon and Utah - for an overall reduction of 5 percent, leaving 6,100 employees, Tatko said.

Regence remains committed to being in Lewiston and continues to hire here, including 40 employees who have joined Regence since Oct. 5, Tatko said. It still has another seven positions open in Lewiston. The reason that Regence isn't giving the jobs to those it laid off is because of differences in skill sets, Tatko said.

One change Regence is making, for example, is converting from different electronic systems in each state to a single system. Someone who worked as a computer technician wouldn't necessarily be a good fit for a job in customer service, Tatko said.

Regence expects its hiring practices to change when the economy improves, Tatko said. "We certainly have a high expectation things are going to turn around."